DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 416 721 FL 801 213

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TITLE Elderly Refugees and Language Learning.
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SPONS AGENCY Office of Refugee Resettlement (DHHS), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 1997-00-00
NOTE 6p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Acculturation; Adult Education; *Adult Learning; Agency Cooperation; *Aging (Individuals); Community Services; Depression (Psychology); *English (Second Language); Learning Strategies; *Older Adults; Physical Health; *Refugees; Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning; Social Services; Sociocultural Patterns

ABSTRACT

For elderly refugees, coming from a variety of cultural situations and with varied educational backgrounds, transplantation to a new culture is an especially difficult process. There is no research evidence to suggest that older adults can not succeed in learning another language, although more deliberate efforts must be made to achieve this. In some ways, adults may have superior language learning capacities. Physical health is an important factor, and hearing and visual acuity are crucial to comprehension. Changes in climate and diet can affect the elderly adversely, particularly in the early stages of acculturation. Social identity, cultural expectations about the educational experience, and attitude and learning motivation are also key factors in language learning success. Teachers can encourage the older language learner by eliminating affective barriers, incorporating adult learning strategies into instruction, making the learning situation and materials relevant to student needs and wishes, and tapping into the goals of the refugee community. Language learning programs specifically for the elderly have been sparse, but a number have been successful. Additional broad strategies include increased dialogue between aging and refugee service organizations and addressing the issue of depression in elderly refugees. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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Spring Institute for International Studies

E L T

Technical Assistance for
English Language Training Projects
1997-1998

Sponsored by the
Office of Refugee Resettlement

Elderly Refugees and Language Learning

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Elderly Refugees and Language Learning

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Refugees coming to the U.S. from Southeast Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East range from highly educated, multilingual former cabinet ministers to non-literate hilltribe people who practiced "slash and burn" agriculture. While the range of peoples is great, the singular event of fleeing from one's homeland with only the clothes on one's back, and moving halfway around the world to a country with a strange language and culture, is traumatic for refugees of any age. For elderly refugees it has been particularly difficult. At a time in their lives when they should be looking forward to respect and reverence, they find themselves transplanted in a culture which is focused on youth. They have lost their homes, probably many of their family members, and most of all, their honored status.

Refugees have many adjustments to make, among them a new language, new culture, and new expectations. Americans expect to work until they are about 65; Southeast Asians are more likely to consider their early fifties rather than their mid-sixties as the beginning of "old age", and refugees from Africa expect to work until they die or are too feeble. It is not expected that one would start learning new things in the elder years, but that is exactly what most refugees have to do.

What We Know About Language Learning and Age

There is no research evidence which suggests that older adults cannot succeed in learning another language. Older adults who remain healthy do not show a decline in their ability to learn. Then why does it seem easier for pre-pubescent children to acquire a language and to speak it without an accent? Researchers are not sure why this phenomenon occurs. One theory claims it is connected with cerebral elasticity. Another theory attributes it to developmental differences in the brain pre- and post-puberty; while another theory highlights the changes in self-perception and willingness to change one's identity that come with adolescence. Whatever the reason, more deliberate effort needs to go into language learning by adults than by children.

There are important aspects, though, where adults may have superior language learning capabilities. Researchers have shown that neural cells responsible for higher order linguistic processes, such as understanding semantic relationships and grammatical sensitivity, develop with age. In the areas of vocabulary and language structure, adults are better language learners than children. While children may be better at mimicry, older learners are more able to make higher order associations and generalizations, and can integrate new language inputs into already substantial learning and experiences. This is particularly true of adults with some formal education, who are used to framing new learning in terms of old learning. Instructional programs which capitalize on these strengths can succeed with older refugees.

Factors that Can Affect Language Learning

Physical health is an important factor in learning at any age, and chronic disease may affect the ability of the elderly refugee to learn. Many have had little or no "professional" medical care throughout their lives, and suffer the residual effects of illnesses that went untreated. This may affect physical mobility, or the converse, the ability to sit for long periods of time. Like other elderly adults, refugees may be affected by hearing loss and vision problems. Their ability to understand oral English, especially in the presence of

background noise, may be affected, and they may have difficulty deciphering written English displayed in small type, especially if their native language does not use a Roman alphabet.

The changes that have occurred in diet and climate sometimes affect refugees physically, and are most often seen in elderly refugees who have been in the U.S. three years or less. Finally, short term memory loss which often occurs with aging can adversely affect the older refugee's success.

Mental health is probably the single most decisive factor in refugee language learning. Depression is very common in general in old age, and for refugees it is often somaticized in such forms as loss of appetite, short attention span, nightmares, and inability to sleep. It is not surprising that refugee elders are depressed. They may have experienced war, disorder, uprooting, and in some cases the horrors of torture, rape, and the bloody death of loved ones. Refugees' depression does not permit them to concentrate well, thus reinforcing the cycle of not being able to speak English and deal with the demands of everyday life.

Social identity, or self re-creation, is also an important factor. A learner's ability to communicate successfully in some situations, and not in others, is mediated by the relationship of power between speakers. For instance, an educated man working in a fast food restaurant seemed more motivated by the need to support his family than by his identity as a language learner. Yet when told to clean up by teenaged co-workers, even though the teens had nothing to do, he ventured forth into English, positioning himself as a father. This gave him the power to get more equitable treatment in the conversation. But his inability to speak English well enough to talk on the telephone, or shop, gave him a sense of ambivalence, and a feeling that he had lost his traditional role as the purveyor of values.

Cultural expectations, such as the role and place of the teacher, or how a language should be taught, also impinge on learning. Cultural beliefs, values, and patterns of a lifetime are not easily changed, even though new circumstances and surroundings may not support old ways. This cultural capital must be invested in new ways in order to obtain material goods, and to gain communicative competence as a speaker of a new language.

Attitude and motivation are key factors in any learning, but especially in language learning. The greatest obstacle to older adults learning a language is the doubt in the mind of the learner that older adults can learn a language. Unfortunately, this doubt is often shared by the language teacher as well. Another barrier is the fact that there is often no perceived need for older adults to learn English. Children, and especially grandchildren, become the negotiators in the new country. Though there may be loss of status in letting younger family members become one's voice, this is often preferable to attempting a learning task which is perceived as hopeless. Many refugee adults are reluctant to take the risks needed in language learning.

Successful Strategies with the Older Language Learner

Teachers can encourage the older language learner by:

1. eliminating affective barriers;
2. incorporating adult learning strategies into their teaching;
3. making the learning situation and the learning materials relevant to the needs and desires of older refugees; and
4. tapping into the goals of the refugee community.

A discussion of these four strategies follows.

Eliminating affective barriers means first and foremost belief on the part of the teacher that older adult learners are not necessarily poor learners. This is key to reducing anxiety and building self-confidence in the learner. In mixed classes, where older language learners are mingled with younger ones, teachers need to arrange the class so that older learners get to speak on a topic in which they are interested and

have knowledge. Teachers need to emphasize the positive, focus on the progress learners are making, and provide opportunities for them to be successful. Students must feel that they have learned something and participated every time they leave a classroom. Such successes can then be reinforced with more of the same.

Taking adult learning theory seriously can help build successes. Adult learning theory assumes that learning situations take into account the experiences of the learner, and provides the opportunity for new learning to be related to previous experiences. It also assumes that for the older adult, readiness to learn is decreasingly the product of biological development or academic pressure, and increasingly the product of the developmental tasks required in work and/or social roles. For the older refugee learner, the key here is developmental social roles. Finally, adult learning theory assumes that children have more of a subject-centered orientation to learning, whereas adults tend to have a problem-centered orientation to learning. This means that language learning should focus on problem solving strategies, whether that be using the telephone, sewing, shopping, or negotiating on the job.

By making the learning environment, the curriculum, and the teaching materials relevant to the refugee adult, what is taught is based on what older learners want and need to learn. Needs analyses of the target populations in a given community should be carried out, and of course, adult learners should be consulted about what they want to learn. For older refugee adults particularly, the learning situation needs to be viewed not only in terms of teaching a language, but in terms of the fulfillment of cultural and social needs as well.

The high drop-out rate of older refugees enrolled in many traditional adult education classes attests to the fact that older adults are not willing to tolerate what to them is boring or irrelevant content, or lessons that stress the learning of grammar rules out of context. When grammar and vocabulary are embedded in the situations refugees will encounter, they not only come to class, but they seem more willing to risk using their new language outside of the classroom. Refugees understand that they are learning English for the specific purposes they deem important, and they take it as a sign of respect when teachers acknowledge those purposes.

It is important that the learning environment acknowledge age. Presentation of new material should have both listening and viewing components to compensate for auditory or visual impairments, and there should be good lighting and the elimination of as much outside noise as possible. Activities which follow presentation should provide opportunities for learners to work together, focusing on understanding rather than producing language. On the other hand, class activities which include large amounts of oral repetition or fast-paced drills, extensive pronunciation correction, or competitive exercises will inhibit the older refugee's active participation.

Methodology should also acknowledge age. Learning strategies that rely more on long-term memory rather than short-term memory, ones that integrate new concepts and materials with already existing cognitive structures, tend to be best for older learners. Spiraling material is of great help with short-term memory, but learning by rote, which also relies on short-term memory, may not be successful even though many adult refugees believe that rote learning is the method of choice. Conversely, while many Africans and Asians may be reluctant to "role play", they may find that putting new words to familiar situations can be a satisfying experience. Lastly, learning entirely new concepts, such as those demanded by a computer or facts associated with citizenship training, may be beyond the capabilities of elderly refugees. A balance needs to be struck between the teacher's beliefs, the older refugee's beliefs, and what we know about the effect of learning on both long term and short term memory.

Language teachers also need to encourage older learners to rely on those learning strategies which have served them well in other contexts. By allowing different approaches to the learning task inside the classroom, teachers can help students discover how they learn best. A visual learner may need to write things down, even though the teacher might prefer that students concentrate on listening. Non-literate refugees might rely on auditory and memory cues, even though teachers tell them to write in their notebooks. By paying attention to learning channels, be they auditory,

visual, kinesthetic or tactile, teachers will reduce frustration and help older learners to be comfortable in the learning situation.

Finally, by tapping into the goals of the refugee community, an essential bond is formed between the teacher and the older refugee. Language learning goals for older adults must mesh not only with individual goals, but with familial and community aspirations as well. For instance, refugee elders need to share and pass on their values, cultural practices, and religion to younger refugees. Older women need to pass on recipes and sewing techniques to younger women. And older men need to pass on the values and virtues of their culture, even though they may not be able to pass on their trades. The refugee community is very concerned with cultural preservation, and that is traditionally the job of the older generation, no matter where the refugees come from. Teachers might use these concerns to create language learning situations.

Glimpses of Some Success Stories

Language learning programs specifically for elderly refugees have been sparse. Those that incorporate more than just language learning seem to be the most successful. In Philadelphia, Project LEIF (Learning English Through Intergenerational Friendship) utilized college-age tutors to teach and learn from older Hmong refugees. Tutoring takes place in a community learning center as well as in the students' homes. In California, older Vietnamese refugees learned English as part of a training program for baby-sitters and day-care workers. These learners are now not afraid to answer the telephone or to initiate emergency calls. In the Washington, D.C. area, illiterate elderly Cambodian women learned English around a stove, a kitchen table, and a sewing machine. Among their new skills is the ability to write their names and addresses, and to recognize warning signs on household products. In New York, older Russian refugees learned English through music and science. Their new skills include the ability to explain and demonstrate to non-Russian speakers what they did in Russia. And in Florida, videos of community activities helped older refugees access community services.

Continuing Needs

A hopeful sign for more older language learner projects is the beginning of a dialog between the aging and refugee service organizations. There is much the two fields can learn from each other. Sharing what works is a first step, and developing effective demonstration projects which can then be adapted and replicated is another.

The identification and use of anti-depressive drugs is yet another step. Most refugees tend to shy away from the traditional "talking" approach of American psychotherapy. With medical research into depression for the elderly in general, the refugee has a choice which may be appealing to him. Modern seratonin uptake inhibiting drugs such as Prozac, Zoloft, or Paxil may help refugees in alleviating the depression, and giving them the energy and outlook that could be used for other things, such as language learning. However, these drugs have to be monitored, and refugees may be reluctant to go to a physician when there seems little reason to do so.

The situation is not as hopeful in the case of research into language learning for the older adult. Few studies have been conducted which investigate the specific characteristics of the older adult language learner. Research into the interaction of memory and age in language learning, as well as into identification of social identity and attitudinal characteristics, are also needed. We as teachers need to work on learning and teaching strategies for older adults and to identify appropriate motivational techniques. Such research would benefit not only the refugee elderly, but the American population in general, as the U.S. becomes a nation with a larger population of older adults.